

Chaos is more than a theory

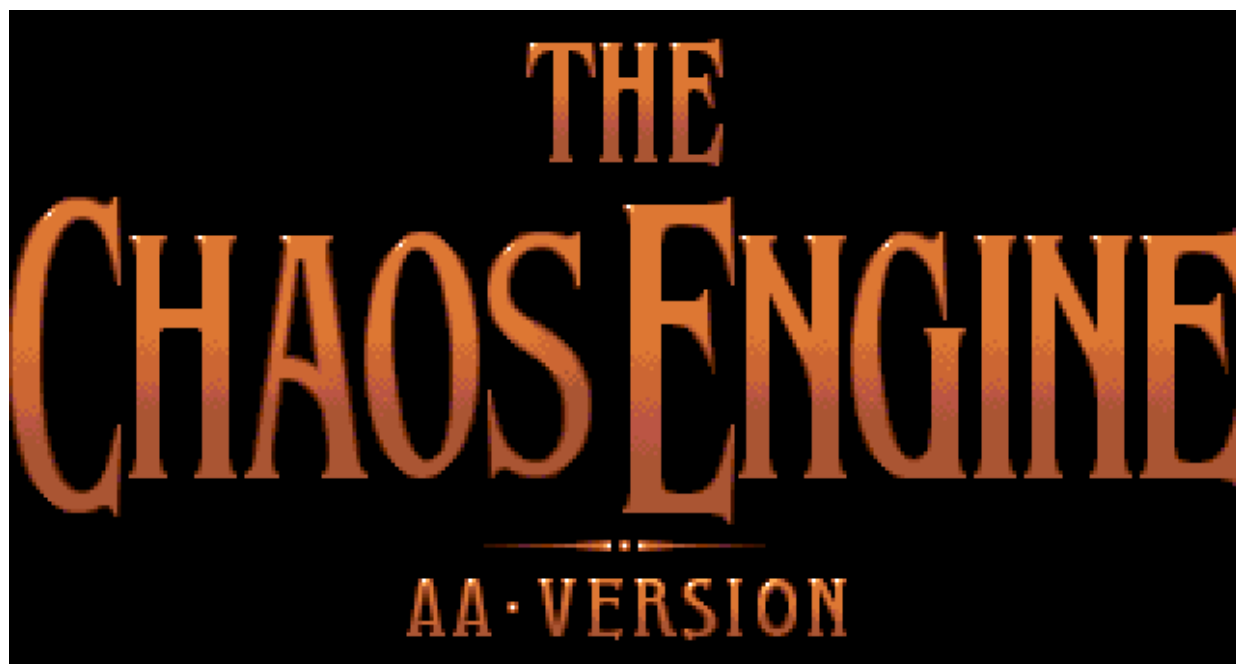
Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

The only thing more rock and roll than owning your own helicopter has to be having the business acumen and foresight to talk the boss of your publishing company into letting you have your photo taken standing in front of his as a publicity stunt. The lasting legacy of The Bitmap Brothers - the legendary developers behind The Chaos Engine - is as much entwined with their inspired PR shenanigans as the quality of their games.

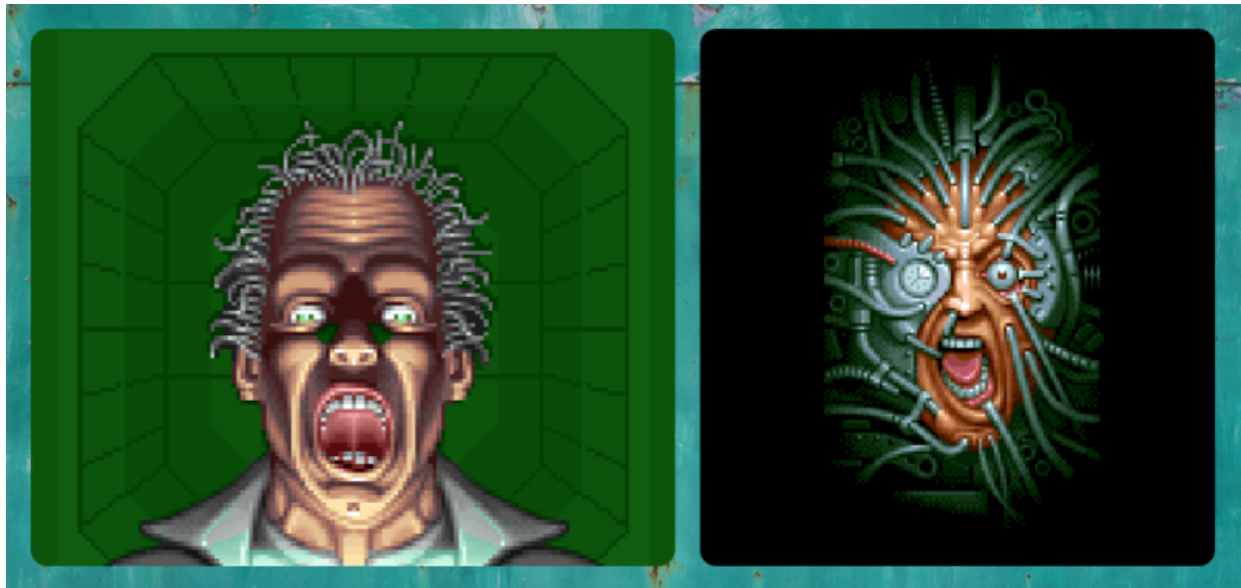
By engaging with the media, The Bitmap Brothers succeeded in wresting away the limelight from the likes of Mirrorsoft and Robert Maxwell to garner the recognition they clearly deserved. They laid the groundwork for the nerd uprising which led to gifted coders, artists and musicians becoming house-hold names, where previously they had only been anonymous drones shrouded by the prominence of financial backers, promoters and distributors.

Chaos Engine is one of those archetypal Marmite games... if you polled opinion solely from members of the Marmite fan club attending the annual MarmiteCon. It was universally eulogised by the magazines of the time across all platforms, accorded with numerous awards, and even named "11th best game of all time" by Amiga Power. Notably, the latter commendation was in part bestowed by Stuart Campbell who rated the game under the dark cloud of an ongoing spat with The Bitmap Brothers who had taken umbrage with his assessment of their prior releases. Clearly a triumph for impartial analysis during a time when buying positive PR wasn't uncommon.



As you might expect from an action-orientated run and gun game, the premise is rather anaemic. 'Charles Babbage' has commandeered a menagerie of futuristic technology from a time traveller stranded in the 19th century and reverse-engineered it to fabricate the 'Chaos Engine' in a dastardly plot to tinker with matter, space and time.

Low and behold things have gone decidedly pear-shaped; the cheeky rascal has only gone and set in motion a rift in the space-time continuum, thereby unleashing seven shades of holy hell upon the natural order, not least of which entails spawning a plethora of genetically mutated monstrosities intent on wreaking havoc on the tranquil, sedate Victorian countryside. That Charlie, he's such a card! Ooh, I could go so far as to ruffle his hair playfully and let slip a tilty-headed bemused chortle.



This well-worn mutation trope has been used and abused for decades in comic books and superhero movies, largely because it gives creative minds carte blanche to let their imagination run riot, hatching all manner of bizarre adversaries and environmental furniture. In Chaos Engine, examples include two varieties of 'Thing' parodies (the 'rockman' superhero from the Fantastic Four, and the disembodied, scuttling hand featured in Addams Family), phallic exit-opening nodes, giant frogs, a human-sized Godzilla-esque lizard-man hybrid sporting a shoulder pad and a single glove (no doubt a Michael Jackson fan!), Cyclops-Slimers, a colour-drained Blanka and pulsating, swelled pustule zit-plants.



The biggest unanswered question is, where is the T-Rex?

To kick this motley assemblage into touch and release the Baron from the slavery of his own now-sentient mechanical progeny, six mercenaries are drafted in. They all bear an uncanny resemblance to, well who?, is the question. Is Brigand modelled on Mel Gibson? The Gentlemen strikes me as a nod towards Jon 'Jops' Hare of Sensible Software fame, a perennial friend to Mike Montgomery, managing director of The Bitmap Brothers. Is the Navvie a homage to Cary Grant or a Robert Carlyle/Tom Selleck mash-up? The Preacher could pass for Robin Gibb without his wig. The Thug could easily be a riff on Master Chef host, Gregg Wallace, though I'm not sure he was under the media spotlight back then. Imagine the fun you could have Photoshopping the poster for the movie adaptation.



It's hard to imagine how the game could fail given the pedigree of the talented coders, musicians and artists involved. With no hint of exaggeration, they are simply among the finest in the business. "So good even that bastard Stuart Campbell liked it", was the copy adorning one magazine advert for the title.



We learn from examining the early beta version and the magazine previews that Chaos Engine was originally destined to be a three-player co-op game, bringing it more in

line with the mechanics of Gauntlet, the granddaddy of run and gun games of this ilk. Nevertheless, the decision to reduce this to just two was made at the 11th hour as it was felt the game would offer little challenge with this much firepower at the players' disposal.

Otherwise, its roots can clearly be traced back to Atari's classic dungeon crawler. Succeeding in the game requires a precise balancing act of cooperative and competitive play given that resources and screen real estate are limited. Hog all the food for yourself and your partner could become malnourished and peg it, leaving you to fend for yourself. You'll also need to synchronise your movements so you aren't lagging behind and hampering the scrolling of the screen, whilst at all times evenly distributing the kills to maximise the effectiveness of your precious, finite ammunition.



While Chaos Engine is widely considered a cult classic in its own right, personally I found the primitive by comparison Gauntlet to be a more enjoyable game, possibly because it evokes a greater sense of dread. As with any accomplished zombie movie, the real threat emanates from the onslaught

of marauding hoards of assailants, mindlessly rushing at you, not anyone isolated foe. Couple this with the sense of urgency roused by your constant health drain and you have a recipe for a nervous breakdown... and somehow this is a good thing!

Plus, not many offline games of the era could boast four-player gameplay. There's nothing quite like huddling around a Miggy with three friends, two wielding joysticks and another two playing finger-Twister on the keyboard mimicking a pair of arthritic grannies.

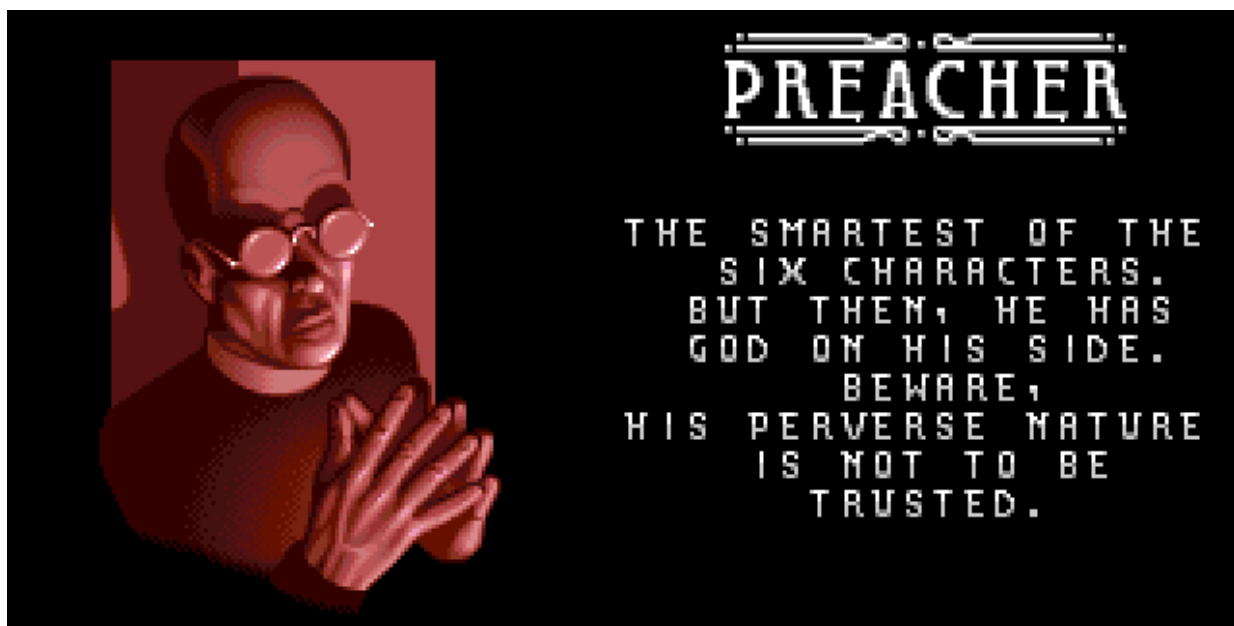


Chaos Engine was ported to the SNES and Mega Drive, though because its publishers thought their American audience wouldn't be able to fathom the lofty nuances of such an esoteric plot, they insisted on changing the name to something much more generic, bland and does-what-it-says-on-the-tin; 'Soldiers of Fortune'. They may as well have called it 'Bang Bang Shooty Game' or 'Tooled-Up Buff Blokes Go On

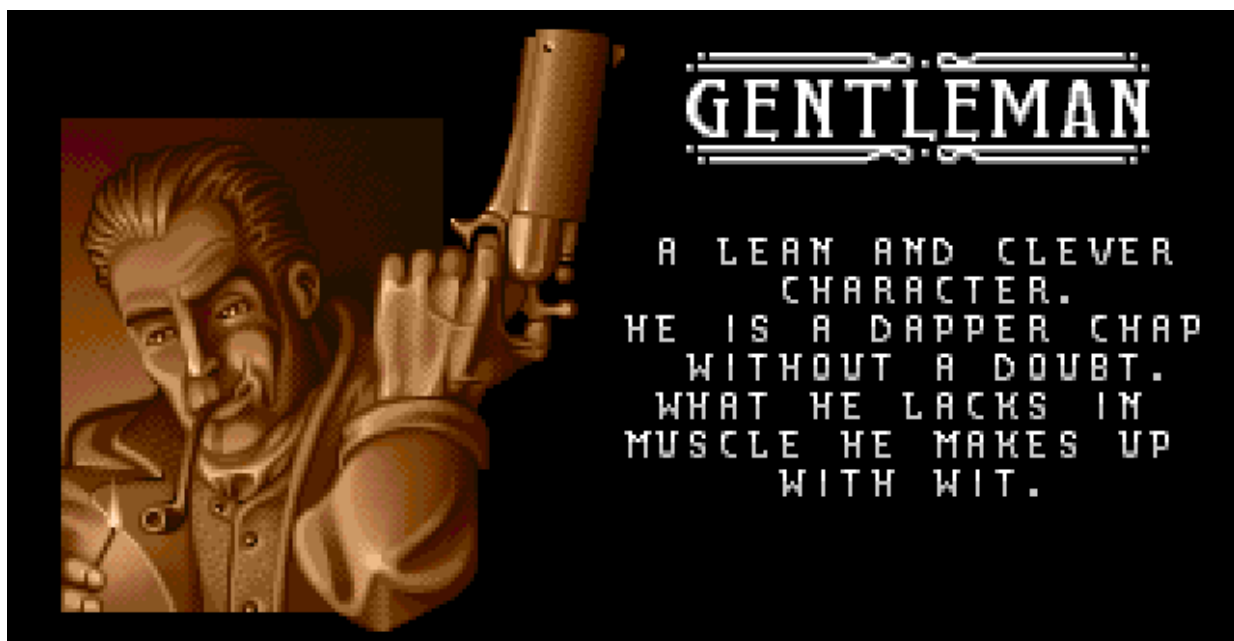
a Cash-Grab'. They must have had a very low opinion of their core demographic!



Their meddling didn't cease there, however. SEGA and Nintendo owing to their theologian mugwumpery decreed that we couldn't have a preacher running around gunning down god's fona and flora, no matter how gruesomely deformed it had become, so the character was switched with a scientist. I'd wager that far more religious leaders have been responsible for carrying out violent atrocities throughout the ages than scientists, but hey ho, it was a deal-breaker so who's going to argue?



The Gentleman's pipe was also 'airbrushed' out for the console releases so as not to encourage impressionable kids to take up smoking, and I suppose to placate the parents who would be buying these games for their delicate offspring.



It speaks volumes for the games' enduring appeal when you consider that some of its most ardent fans have gone so far as to construct a level editor which allows players to modify

the existing maps or assemble entirely new ones. When I think of games that have been resuscitated endlessly over the years, artificially extending their lifespan for new generations to enjoy through the deployment of level editors, the first one to spring to mind is Doom. Does this equalize the playing field? Can it in any sense elevate Chaos Engine to share the same pedestal? You decide.



In 2013 The Bitmap Brothers released an HD update of Chaos Engine - appropriately - for the Steam platform. Over and above the original game it features two graphical filters to help smooth out the blocky, pixelated graphics, an online co-op mode, the capacity to fire in a 360-degree arc (before you were restricted to 8-way shooting), and well, little else really. Its colour palette was taken from the inferior AGA version which looks garish compared to the fittingly drab Steampunk grey and brown hues of the OCS/ECS release. The reception was none too stellar with many critics dubbing it a 'lazy port'.

Chaos Engine is drastically enriched by timeless hand-drawn graphics and immersive, dynamic sound making it an outstanding achievement both visually and sonically. It's tightly coded and adeptly optimised, has few bugs and the dexterity afforded by the controls is impressive, though, for me, there's just something lacking in the gameplay department. Once you've played through the first level, the subsequent ones fail to inspire or offer sufficient variety, and with no end of level bosses to contend with, there's little to keep you plugging away to reveal the anti-climactic twist which concludes the narrative. Sadly, the individual parts are greater than their sum.